CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND LITERACY ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF

ONE PRE-KINDERGARTEN CLASSROOM

by

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CERTIFICATION OF PROJECT WORK

We, the undersigned, certify that this project entitled CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND
LITERACY ENGAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF ONE PRE-KINDERGARTEN
CLASSROO by Kayla J. McAllister, Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science in
Education, Literacy Education: Birth-Grade Six, is acceptable in form and content and
demonstrates a satisfactory knowledge of the field covered by this project.

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Abstract

The purpose of this descriptive study was to determine whether classroom environment played a role in literacy engagement and motivation. The study investigated whether classroom environment could hinder or promote literacy engagement and in what ways. Data collection included: teacher and student interviews, observational notes, classroom photographs, and the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale. The participants included one classroom teacher and three students, one male and two females from her classroom. The teacher chosen was a twentieth year teacher with a lot of experience and the students chosen included two, four year old females and one, five year old male. Date were collected through various ways including: teacher and student interviews, observational notes, classroom photographs, and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. The data were then coded for common trends found throughout the duration of the study. Findings from the data support that classroom environment does play a role in literacy engagement and motivation.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Statement of Problem

Rebecca Capen (2010) stated that, "…the overall environment established in the classroom—the social and instructional components—add to or detract from students' reading motivation" (p.22). The purpose of this study, which will be a case study of a pre-kindergarten class, is to examine the effects of classroom environment on literacy engagement. The International Reading Association standards discuss a literate environment which includes both visible and invisible support and motivation to learners. Because this topic is supported by the IRA, there are a plethora of research articles about environment. However, many of these articles do not make the correlation between classroom environment, both social and physical, and student's motivation for literacy events such as reading, socializing about books, and making text to text connections. By providing a literate and motivating classroom environment, teachers may have the power to engage their students in more literacy activities. The classroom environment should support various types of learners with various types of needs while increasing motivation to learn and engage in literacy events and activities.

Four terms are used throughout this paper. These terms include: classroom environment, social environment, motivation, and literacy engagement. In my research study, *classroom environment* refers to everything in the classroom including, but not limited to the centers, wall space, furniture, and dividers as well as the social environment. *Social environment* used in this particular study refers to an environment that fosters interaction between students, between the teacher and students, and between teachers and co-teachers. Also, social environment implies that the students feel comfortable and are able to share their ideas, beliefs and thoughts with support. *Motivation* when used in this study indicates the desire to participate in an activity. In

this particular study, the term *literacy engagement* will refer to students having the desire to read, write, and speak at all times throughout the day and in all areas of the room.

Background

The topic of classroom environment is important enough that it appears in the International Reading Association standards. For example, on the IRA website, http://www.reading.org/General/Default.aspx , Standard 5: Literate Environment states *"Candidates create a literate environment that fosters reading and writing by integrating foundational knowledge, instructional practices, approaches and methods, curriculum materials, and the appropriate use of assessments"* (International Reading Association Website, 2010, ¶ 1). Although this is an international standard, classroom environment is still not as valued as it should be. From my own personal experience, classroom environment can have a great impact on literacy engagement and motivation. When I was in Kindergarten the reading area consisted of an old cast-iron bathtub filled with pillows and blankets. Everyone in my Kindergarten class wanted to read so that they could get a chance in this creative and unusual reading environment. I remember being very drawn to this area and anytime we were granted opportunities for free choice, this is where I went. From then on, I have always loved reading and I have begun to wonder if it all started because the first literacy environment I remember was so engaging and inviting.

According to Jaramilo (1996), "Vygotsky stressed that the mind and body of the subject are joined, and that this connection is further expressed between the subject and objects in his environment" (p. 136). Significant research has been done on classroom environment and the effects that it has on students. Most of the studies, such as one completed by Andrew J. Mashburn (2008), focus mostly on how quality literacy environments have an effect on

children's cognitive development, literacy development, as well as the child's physical development. For example, Mashburn (2008) states that research thus far "supports that higher quality experiences within preschool programs are associated positively with children's development" (p.114). Although various studies have been conducted on whether classroom environment affects overall development in children, further research is needed to determine whether classroom environment can actually motivate or discourage literacy engagement.

Theoretical Framework

As a constructivist, I believe that learning is a natural and ongoing process. According to Frank Smith (1971), "Learning is not an occasional event, to be stimulated, provoked, or reinforced. Learning is what the brain does naturally, continually" (p. 47). Vygotsky, believed in a social constructivist method which Powell (2009) describes as a method "where students act first on what they can do on their own and then with assistance from the teacher, they learn the new concept based on what they were doing individually" (p. 244). This is known as Lev Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky's theory is also related to student centered classrooms because it allows the students to complete tasks on their own to the best of their ability before receiving help from their teacher. I believe that having a classroom environment that is stimulating and invites literacy engagement promotes students learning as a natural process. Students should have desire to learn and engage in literacy activities, rather than viewing them as a chore or something that has to be done. By creating an environment conducive to literacy engagement and learning, classroom teachers are allowing their students to make choices that will ultimately further their motivation and learning. Once the classroom teacher has ensured that the classroom environment is stimulating and engaging, students ultimately have to make the decision to engage in the environment. The teacher's role in this type of

classroom is more "of a facilitator and guide, and not of a director and dictator (Powell & Kalina, 2009, p. 247). The teacher's role is then to provide the students with all the materials for a literate environment and therefore, the students are able to flourish by using the tools and materials provided as scaffolding. In a constructivist classroom, assessment is mainly done by observing. The teacher may observe what is being done socially as well as academically. The International Reading Association also supports the need for a literate classroom environment in the aforementioned Standard 5.

Questions That Guide the Study

The following questions guided the study:

1) How does classroom environment play a role in literacy engagement and motivation?

2) What role does the teacher have in creating a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation?

3) What does an effective early childhood classroom's literacy environment require?

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Chapter 2

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into sections based on the three questions that guided the research study: 1) How does classroom environment play a role in literacy engagement and motivation? 2) What role does the teacher have in creating a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation? and 3) What does an effective early childhood classroom's literacy environment require?

Motivation is a key component in student's literacy engagement and success. This component gives students the desire to participate and engage in literacy events. Rebecca Capen (2010) describes motivated students as those who, "want to read and choose to read for a wide range of personal reasons such as curiosity, involvement, social interchange, and emotional satisfaction" (p. 21). Some studies have been conducted to try and determine what, if anything, helps motivate students to engage in literacy activities. Results from the few studies that have been done determined that classroom environment plays a key role in whether or not young students will be motivated to engage in literacy events such as reading, writing, or paper handling in the classroom.

How Does Classroom Environment Play a Role in Literacy Engagement and Motivation?

Although there are not many studies on the topic, some studies have been done to try and determine whether or not classroom environment can affect literacy engagement and motivation. Some of these studies have proven that the two factors are positively correlated. According to Morrow and Rand (1991), "Studies of literacy activities in early childhood indicate that the physical environment is essential in supporting and actively influencing literacy learning" (p. 397). During a study done by Morrow in 1990 involving 170 students (84 female and 86 male)

from thirteen middle class pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, it was determined that students are more likely to engage in literacy events in their classroom if literacy materials were introduced by the teachers who then guided the students in using these materials. Similar results were found in a study conducted by Neilson and Monson (2001) which used 83 students in two different kindergarten programs. This study found that students in the reading readiness program, although significantly younger, were making larger gains in their literacy achievement. This difference between the two programs assessed during this study was thought to be the result of the different literacy environments. A similar study conducted by Cunningham (1998) using 428 students from 24 preschools indicated that attitudes toward reading varied depending on the quality of the classroom environment. Cunningham (1998) states that "Improving the quality of the environment in which children participate, in turn, improves the students' literacy ability and their attitudes toward literacy in general (p. 32). Another study done by Denise Cunningham also concluded literacy motivation and engagement and classroom environment were positively correlated. Cunningham (2010) believes, "The key to early literacy development is a rich, well-organized environment that can support teacher's goals for children—in other words, a high quality literacy environment" (p. 501-502).

Some studies have shown how classroom environment can affect literacy engagement and motivation. This is the reason that some people believe it is extremely important for classroom environments to be stimulating and inviting beginning with pre-school. These researchers believe that having an inviting classroom context not only encourages engagement, but also helps foster engagement for other classrooms and contexts throughout the student's career and ultimately helps foster an interest in academics and literacy activities. According to Turner (2001), "Classroom context influences students' developing conceptions of literacy and

their willingness to engage in literacy behaviors" (p. 410). Turner (2001) also believes that the motivation goes both ways. She states that to be motivated, students must participate with their learning environments and engage in tasks, but also to become motivated "learning environments must offer opportunities that will invite students' efforts and participation" (p. 413). Many researchers believe that setting up an inviting and engaging classroom is the first step in creating an environment conducive to learning (Stewart & Evans, 1997, p. 53). Stewart and Evans (1997) believe that "physical space, appropriate furniture, designated areas, traffic patterns, seating arrangement, and visual appeal are among the most critical issues to be addressed" (p. 53). Studies have proven that appealing classroom environments stimulate motivation and engagement. Dittoe and Porter (2007) looked at various aspects of designing a classroom from the furniture in the classroom to the hallways outside the classroom. They believe that designing a classroom is somewhat of an art form and that learning can and should be taking place everywhere and with the correct classroom design, it will. Dittoe and Porter (2007) state that, "well-designed environments with pleasing proportions, colors, textures and lighting can inspire learning" (p. 29). Many educators believe that a book rich classroom will foster literacy engagement. Studies have shown that to foster literacy engagement, the environment has to offer more than a variety of books. Linda Gambrell (1996) states that "A book-rich classroom environment is essential to nurturing and supporting young readers, but it is not sufficient for the development of highly motivated readers" (p. 21). This is why some researchers believe that pre-school is where literacy motivation can be fostered for the rest of student's careers which can then result in reading success throughout grades. One of these researchers is Denise Cunningham (1998) who states that "attention to the physical environment and the curriculum in the early childhood years can reduce the likelihood of school failure due to reading difficulties" (p. 33).

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Therefore these researchers are finding that classroom environment not only affects student's motivation and engagement in the younger years, but this motivation and engagement, in turn, helps students succeed throughout their school careers. Weigel, Martin, and Bennett (2005) did a study of 123 families with 3 year olds and again with 85 families with 3 year olds to find the influences of home and school literacy environments. These studies indicated that the "quality of the literacy environment of the child care is associated with positive literacy and language outcomes for young children" (Wiegel et. al, 2005, p. 210). Some researchers believe that environment is such an important aspect of early childhood education and yet it still does not get as much attention as it deserves. Fraser (1986, p. 1) as cited in Dolina McAulay (1990), states that "the classroom environment is such a potent determinant of student outcomes that it should not be ignored by those wishing to improve the effectiveness of schools" (p. 239).

Also, many studies found that how students perceive classroom environment can affect literacy motivation and engagement. Lee (2009) refers to another study that found "that students' perceptions of some classroom environment factors, e.g., perceived quality of physical environment and class master's expert power and coercive power, were the strongest predictors of their affective performance, including self concept, attitude toward peers, school and teachers" (p. 221). In Sungur and Senler (2010) study with 482 elementary students hypothesized that "classroom environment perceptions are related directly to competence expectancies, motivation toward education, and achievement goals" (p. 308). These studies show that how the students view the classroom can affect how the student engages in the classroom activities including those based in literacy. The classroom environment can also affect how the teachers and students feel and think. As cited by Susan Stewart (1997), "the physical environment can influence the way teachers and students, feel, think, and behave" (p. 53).

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Although many studies have proven the importance of classroom environment in motivating young students to participate in literacy events, some studies have found that there is not a direct correlation between the two factors. One such study conducted by Andrew Mashburn (2008) which used 540 four-year-olds aimed to "examine associations between preschool quality (overall quality and quality of the social and physical environments) and the average levels of academic , language, and literacy development of children enrolled in these classes" (p. 116). The conclusion of this study was that the quality of the physical environment was not associated with the children's developmental outcomes by the end of preschool. A literature review completed by MacAulay (1990) focusing on classroom environment showed that classroom environment was related to classroom disturbance and anxiety, but not with academic performance.

There are many factors that fit together to make a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation and ultimately literacy learning. Galini and Efthymia (2009) describe classroom environment as an intricate system that needs these four parts to function correctly and efficiently to be successful: "physical setting, organizational aspects, teacher characteristics, and pupil characteristics" (p. 110). The next section elaborates on the characteristics and roles a teacher must take on to create a classroom that fosters literacy engagement and motivation.

What Role Does the Teacher Have in Creating a Classroom Environment Conducive to Literacy Engagement and Motivation?

According to the results of a study performed by Chi-Kin Lee, J., et al (2009), "the teacher is the most crucial factor in Hong Kong's classroom environment" (p. 227). Teachers have a very important role in making a classroom environment that is conducive to learning and

inviting to the majority of students. Classroom teachers have the responsibility of not only teaching the students who come into their classroom, but they also have the responsibility to try to create an environment where students feel comfortable learning and free to engage in learning and literacy activities. According to research, to succeed at this goal, teachers must have an inviting and warm attitude, communicate effectively with both students and co-teachers, and act like guides in order to help students succeed in the environment.

Teacher as classroom designer.

The teacher is responsible for designing an effective classroom environment. This environment must engage students and spark their interest enough to make them want to become involved and motivate them to participate. "Morrow and Weinstein (1986) and Morrow (1987) found that teachers could increase children's voluntary use of literacy materials simply by designing visible, accessible, attractive literacy or library corners" (Morrow & Rand, 1991, p. 397). According to MacAulay (1990) "research shows that teacher preferences vary with amount of teaching experience, classroom confidence and the education ideology predominant at the time of training" (p. 239). Teachers have a crucial job in making a classroom that is both engaging as well as functional. Neuman and Roskos (2007) state that,

> The organization of a space, as well as it's structures and materials, and the attractive ways in which these are set up, should give children a sense of well being and at the same time invite them to explore, learn, and communicate. (p. 18)

According to Neuman and Roskos designing an effective classroom environment takes many steps including, but not limited to: measuring space, allocating space, locating activity in space, arranging space, organizing tools and materials, and arranging storage and signage.

Positive and inviting teacher attitude.

One of the teacher's most important roles in creating a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation is being positive and inviting. A study completed by MacAulay (1990) says that although no research has been done to show that a warm and inviting teacher can affect learning, avoiding a negative attitude and environment is a must.

> The teacher's attitude toward children and education determines to a very real degree how children perceive school, themselves, and each other—and how much progress they actually make. Teachers can make learning pleasant or punishing; they can create motivation or fear; they can produce excited anticipation or dread. A teacher's personal style and approach, more than anything else, create the climate and mood which will characterize the classroom (Smith, Neisworth, and Greer, 1978, p. 84).

Teacher attitude includes the teacher's attitude toward reading. Many researchers state that if the teacher is a motivated and engaged reader, then students will be motivated and engaged. "Teachers who reported extensive personal reading of literature seemed to have students who were often involved in a discussion of books and who often read plays or drama or studied style and structure of texts" (Lundberg & Linnakyla, 1993, p. 40). Gambrell (1996) agrees when she says that, "One of the key factors in motivating students to read is a teacher who values reading and is enthusiastic about sharing a love of reading with students" (p. 20). Researchers suggest that teachers model how to be motivated and engaged readers to obtain motivated and engaged readers. Because teacher attitude is so important in having a classroom environment that is nurturing and effective, it is vital for teachers to evaluate their performance often. Smith et al (1978) encourage teachers to not only evaluate their performance, but to also evaluate the impact their behavior may have on the social development of the students in the classroom.

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Teacher as guide/model.

Another important role of the classroom teacher is becoming a guide for the students. According to Jaramillo (1996), "teachers must act as guides and set the conditions for students to successfully interact with their learning setting" (p. 138). In a constructivist classroom teachers often take both a guide role and a facilitator role. This allows students to explore and learn things on their own time and in their own ways. However, they know how to interact properly with the environment and material because the teacher has guided them in doing so. Although students benefit greatly from a well designed classroom, teachers can also benefit from a classroom conducive to learning and engagement. According to Yulia Stukalina (2010), "creating the environment that is conducive to teaching and learning greatly contributes to the development of the environment that is conducive to performance" (p. 347). Other researchers agree with this thought that the classroom environment can help encourage and sustain the learning process. Katherine Powell and Cody Kalina state that (2009), "effective teachers beget effective learners" (p. 248).

Teacher as communicator.

Another important role of the classroom teacher is to have good communication skills. Teachers must communicate with students and other teachers throughout the day to create an effective learning environment. According to MacAulay (1990), "Teachers' feedback to children regarding their school performance appears to be related to perceived self-competence in education environments" (p. 239).

Teachers must strive to be effective communicators because students learning styles and feelings may depend on the teacher's attitude and effectiveness. Teachers must figure out what

encompasses an effective learning environment to create a classroom that will create lifelong

learners. According to Turner (2001),

While providing instruction, teacher should *immerse* children in print, *demonstrate* how   texts

are used, have high *expectations* for children's learning while requiring students to   take

responsibility for many of their own decisions and choices, encourage children to use

approximations of conventional forms, provide opportunities to *practice* using   reading and

writing in meaningful ways, *engage* in the process of learning, and *respond*   with

supportive and instructive feedback. (p. 414)

An effective classroom literacy environment requires many things that will focused on in the

following section.

What Does an Effective Early Childhood Classroom's Literacy Environment Require?

From all these studies it has been made clear what a teacher can do to guarantee

engagement and motivation in their own classrooms. Many of the articles discussed the teacher's

role in making an engaging environment conducive to literacy learning. Also, these studies and

articles have given teachers suggestions of what to include in their classrooms to try and

guarantee some level of motivation and engagement. Bullard (2010) says "Our classroom

environment either promotes or distracts from our learning goals, encouraging or discouraging

success for all children. The environment needs to reflect our beliefs and theories about how

children learn" (p. 85).

Joy Turner (1999) assessed the physical environment of an early childhood program that

had a Montessori base and focused on structure/arrangement, décor/sensory aspects, storage,

furnishings, equipment, safety, cleanliness, and adult/community space. Turner (1999) states

that:

A purposeful, carefully planned and organized environment is a hallmark and primary

strength of the Montessori system, because it is an embodiment and focal point for what

the system represents: a profound respect for the developing child in all of his or her

manifestations. (p. 20)

Similar aspects of the classroom were focused on by Maryann Manning (2000) when designing

her own classroom. Manning focused on five areas of her classroom: classroom library,

technology, literacy centers, furnishings, and display/demonstration space. Each of these

components when designed effectively allow Manning's students to excel both academically and

socially.

The Reggio Emilia approach is known for having a classroom environment that is

supportive and engaging to the students involved. In fact, this approach is said to contain three

teachers: the teacher, the child, and the environment (Strong-Wilson, 2007, p. 40). This type of

classroom uses the environment as a teaching tool to help keep students engaged and wanting to

learn more. Yu (2008) says, "The organization of the physical environment is crucial to the

Reggio Emilia approach. The environment is designed to inform and engage children and those

that visit the schools" (p. 127-128). One way the environment helps to inform those involved in

the school setting is through the use of documentation. Documentation can be anything from

photographs, audio-taped conversations, and visual art. This documentation is used to make

learning visible to people entering the classroom as well as to give the children the opportunity to

plan the curriculum through their interests and questions. Visible documentation allows people

entering the classroom, including students and adults, to not only view the work being done in

the classroom, but to allow them to see how the work was done. New (2008) states that, "A

visitor to a Reggio Emilia classroom finds an inviting environment, with adult- and child-sized

furnishings, plants and natural light, large panels documenting the children's ideas, and very

commercially produced materials" (p. 34).

Morrow, Tracey, Woo, and Pressley (1999) looked at characteristics that make up an

exemplary first grade classroom in regards to literacy instruction. These researchers collected

data from six exemplary first grade teachers from three different school districts. All of the

classrooms observed were said to have "literacy rich environments" (p. 464). These researchers

looked at everything from positioning of desks to encourage social interactions to the materials

displayed on the walls. Morrow et al. (1999) stated that "The classrooms were rich with

materials for children to have choices, challenges, social interaction, and success" (p. 474).

These researchers also state that these classrooms did not just happen, but came "as a result of

careful thought, planning, and a conscious knowledge of a philosophy of education" (p. 474).

Vukelich, Christie, and Enz (2012) also focus on the importance of creating a print rich

environment. Vukelich et al. state that "When classrooms are effectively arranged and contain

lots of meaningful print, language, and literacy opportunities, children's literacy learning is

promoted" (Neuman & Roskos, 2007, cited in Vukelich et. al, 2012). Stewart and Evans (1997)

agree that effective classroom environments take a lot of planning and thought, but they also

state that an effective classroom needs to constantly be refined. These researchers compare an

effective classroom to a quilt when they say, "numerous and diverse parts gain distinctiveness

through the contribution of each piece to a whole. Effective classrooms must be carefully pieced

together with a larger view of how the entire project should appear" (p. 54). Although a literacy

rich environment is important, Neuman and Roskos (2007) warn against the fine line between a

print-rich environment and a print-littered environment meaning that the print and literacy is

overwhelming and therefore loses the intended meaning for the children. In a study conducted by

Denise Cunningham (2010) an exemplar classroom "provided developmentally appropriate activities in which children could (a) make choices, (b) explore conceptual ideas, (c) experiment with social and academic language, (d) exchange ideas with peers and adults, and (e) make connections across an integrated curriculum" (p. 505). Jim Greenman (1989) made a list of key elements to an effective learning center. The key elements listed include: the right size and scale, good boundaries, the right amount of seclusion, zoning, sufficient number of areas and choices, clear expectations, open storage, and adult closed storage (p. 50). Diane Dodge (1989) agrees that physical and social environment are an important aspect in making an effective early childhood classroom. Dodge (1989) states that "Making the environment safe and orderly, filled with varied materials organized into appropriate activity areas, is a good place to start because it makes life more satisfying for teachers and for children" (p. 44). Teachers are often most frustrated with their classroom environments because they feel like they are not conducive to the learning that needs to be taking place. By organizing the classrooms with appropriate furnishings and materials, both the students and the teachers benefit.

Based on this research, exemplary classrooms for literacy instruction have to be thought out and planned by the teacher. Also, these exemplary classrooms must provide many opportunities for students to be social and interact with each other and the materials. This means that everything from the furniture in the classroom, how the desks are arranged, the materials provided, and the use of visual displays need to come together to guarantee an effective classroom environment conducive to learning and working together. According to Denise Cunningham (2008), "Improving the quality of the environment in which children participate, in turn, improves the students' literacy ability and their attitudes toward literacy in general" (p. 32).

   Although many studies have been done to determine whether or not the classroom environment, both physical and social, affect student's literacy engagement and motivation, the answer is still unclear. Some studies show a positive correlation between the two factors while some studies found that the two were not related. Based on the literature used for this literature review, more studies should be conducted to determine whether or not this is true.

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Chapter 3

Methods

The purpose in conducting this study was to determine whether or not the classroom environment had an effect, either positively or negatively, on literacy engagement and motivation. I used qualitative measures to determine these effects. Qualitative measures that were used during this study included teacher and student audio-taped interviews and discussions, classroom photographs, classroom observations, the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), and field notes.

Participants

Children. This study focused on three subjects from one prekindergarten classroom from a small rural school in Western New York. The total class size of this particular prekindergarten classroom included seventeen students; nine female and eight male. Three students who granted consent and whose parents granted consent were then selected by the classroom teacher to participate in the study. These particular students were chosen based on whom the teacher believed would be willing to fully participate in discussions with me, the researcher, about the classroom environment. Two of these students were female and one of the students was male. The participant's names were changed for the sake of this particular study. For this research project the two female students will be called 'Melissa' and 'Katherine.' Both Melissa and Katherine are four years old and will not turn five until July of 2012, but are not related. Both girls are Caucasian and come from an English speaking home. The male student, 'Andrew', is five years old and will turn six in December of 2012. 'Andrew' is also Caucasian and speaks English as his first language.

Teacher. This study also focused on one classroom teacher from the same prekindergarten classroom. This teacher, 'Mrs. Stacy', is a Caucasian female who is approximately forty years old and in her twentieth year of teaching. Mrs. Stacy participated in audio-taped interviews and discussions that helped me determine why she chose to design her classroom environment the way it was designed and what she noticed about the students' interactions with the environment.

Methods of Data Collection

Data were collected from Wednesday, February 15, 2012 until Friday, March 13, 2012. Data included: audio-taped interviews of both the participating students and the classroom teacher, classroom photographs, classroom observations, environmental checklists (ECERS), and observational field notes. The audio-taped interviews with the classroom teacher helped to determine her reasoning behind designing the classroom environment the way she did and how she witnessed her students interacting with the environment on a daily basis. These interviews also helped me understand who or what influenced Mrs. Stacy in the way in which she designed and organized the classroom. The classroom teacher was interviewed twice during the study; once at the beginning of the study to gain a basic understanding of her classroom setup and again toward the end of the study to understand more thoroughly why she designed things in specific ways. The selected students were interviewed a total of five times each to determine why they liked specific areas in the classroom and which centers in the classroom were their favorite. This not only helped me to understand whether the students were being engaged and motivated to learn, but it helped me to determine if the teacher was taking the student's interests into account when designing the classroom. Photographs, used to describe the environment, were taken of the classroom environment including, but not limited to: centers, wall space, literacy displays, and

the whole group environment. These photographs were taken throughout the study to document how the classroom was set up and any changes that occurred in the classroom environment. Observations were completed each time I visited the prekindergarten classroom. Field notes were taken during each observation. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) contend that:

> fieldnotes can provide any study with a personal log that helps the researcher to keep track of the development of the project, to visualize how the research plan has been affected by the data collected, and to remain aware of how he or she has been influenced by the data. (p. 111)

I wrote observational field notes about what I saw the participating students doing, what I heard them saying, and whether these students liked or disliked the centers that they participated in for the day. I also wrote observational field notes on the social environment in the classroom including: how the teacher interacted one-on-one with the students, how the teacher and assistant teacher interacted with each other, how the students interacted with each other, and how the class interacted as a whole. An environmental checklist was used to assess the space and furnishings of the classroom environment as well as the interaction taking place. This checklist, called the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) was written by Thelma Harms and Debby Cryer in 1998. The ECERS checklist was completed about half way through the study to determine if both the physical environment and the social environment were adequate.

Methods of Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, I analyzed data to determine whether the classroom environment really did play a role in literacy engagement and motivation. To analyze the data, I first organized all my field notes, the typed transcripts of the audio-taped interviews, and the ECERS checklist into a binder in the order of when they occurred. I then went through all the

information and highlighted content based on the three questions that helped guide the study. This is a technique called coding. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) describe the coding system as "a means of sorting the descriptive data you have collected (the signs under which you would pile the toys) so that the material bearing on a given topic can be physically separated from other data" (p. 161). By coding the data, I was able to form categories based on the aforementioned questions which were used to guide the study. While observing and again while coding, I would add my own comments as an observer. These comments helped me remember both what was happening at the time of the observation and what I was thinking and feeling at the time. Coding all the information gathered during the research portion of this study helped me organize and understand my findings so that I was able to analyze the data in a way that could be effectively communicated.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

During the course of the study, many methods of data collection were used including observational notes, photographs taken of the classroom environment, interviews with both the participating students and teacher, as well as the ECERS scale. Data from these sources were then organized and coded based on the three questions that guided the study. These questions included:

1) How does classroom environment play a role in literacy engagement and motivation?

2) What role does the teacher have in creating a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation?

3) What does an effective early childhood classroom's literacy environment require?

Description of the Literacy Environment

The classroom observed for this study was particularly small. Although the space was restricted in size, it was used wisely. Right inside the door, the students had cubbies to store their personal belongings. Behind the cubbies was the sink and the bathroom and next to them was the sand table center. In front of the cubbies was a small round table used for morning activities and breakfast as well as for the puzzles and games center. The whole group meeting area was located in the front center area of the room and included a large rug in front of a white board which was used for calendar, the daily question, word wall, and many other examples of environmental print. Behind the whole group rug was a long table which was used for morning activities and breakfast as well as one on one work with Mrs. Stacy. Positioned diagonally to Mrs. Stacy's table were two parallel long tables that were used for morning activities and breakfast. During center time, one table was used as the dollhouse center and one was used as a

work space for Mrs. D to work with students in their ABC journals. Behind these tables was an open area on the floor that was used to set up the Lego rugs and Lego bin during center time. Then directly behind that was the housekeeping center which remained set up in the classroom all day. Across from this was a large portion of the room that was sectioned off for storage for the teacher's books and extra materials.

Individual Centers

The classroom utilized many centers. These centers consisted of dollhouses, Legos, puzzles and games, the sand table, housekeeping, and blocks. The descriptions of these centers and the classroom literacy environment were based on the observations completed during the course of the study. The dollhouse center included about fifteen small sized dollhouses and various pieces of furniture and people. This center was set on one of the long tables in the classroom. The Lego center included two small rugs that had road and town designs and a tote full of Legos and Lego vehicles to use on the rugs. The rugs were placed on the floor right behind the table used as the dollhouse center. The puzzles and games center was located at the only round table in the classroom and consisted of many age appropriate games and large floor puzzles. The large floor puzzles were usually done on the floor surrounding the carpeted whole group area. The sand table was located near the bathroom in the classroom and had measuring cups, funnels, spoons, shovels, and other various toys to play with. Housekeeping, the largest center, was in the back of the classroom and consisted of a play kitchen including pots, pans and play food as well as babies, purses, and dress up clothes. This center also had a tool bench full of tools and work goggles for the students to use. The block center took place on the carpeted whole group area. This center consisted of blocks used to build as well as block people, plastic animals, and many forms of toy vehicles.

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The centers in the classroom were used during the morning. First, Melissa, Andrew, and Katherine would come in and eat breakfast and play with the manipulatives on their assigned tables. When everyone in the class was finished with breakfast, the students would meet with the teacher, Mrs. Stacy, on the carpeted whole group area for morning meeting. Morning meeting consisted of going over the calendar, discussing the weather, and sometimes singing songs. After morning meeting, Mrs. Stacy would call the whole class group by group to go to their centers which she had previously chosen for them. Melissa, Andrew, and Katherine remained at a center for about twenty minutes before switching to their next center and rotated through two or three centers depending on the day of the week.

During the course of the week, Melissa, Andrew, and Katherine would rotate through the centers at least once, if not more than once. They were interviewed various times. First, each one was asked what their favorite and least favorite centers were. During the following weeks, they were asked how they felt about individual centers that they were assigned during the morning. Melissa, Andrew, and Katherine all had opinions about whether they liked or disliked the centers as illustrated in table 4.1.

Table 4.1

Center Code	Center	Participating Student Comments	Participating Teacher Comments
DH	dollhouses	**Melissa**-"I pretty much like it 'cuz I get to play and have houses that I want." Also said it was her least favorite center. **Andrew**- "I like the mailman and the horses!" Also said it was his least favorite center. **Katherine**- "Umm…I don't like them (dollhouses)."	Said this was one of the most popular centers with this class. "Both boys and girls love going there!"
L	Legos	**Andrew**-"I like to make stuff, like cars and stuff!" **Katherine**-likes the Lego people.	

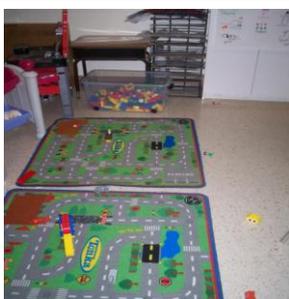|		Also said this was her favorite center.	
P & G	puzzles & games	**Melissa**-"I like it because you get to have a puzzle and you get to build it together as a team!" **Andrew**-"I like this *points to EIEIO game he was playing with*." Also said this was one of his favorite centers along with housekeeping. **Katherine**- "I don't like it!"	
ST	sand table	**Melissa**-"Umm..that I like it because umm you get to umm play with sand." **Katherine**-"I don't like it. Because it has sand it and gives you a mess!"	Said this was one of the most popular centers with this class.
HK	housekeeping	**Melissa**-likes to play with babies. Also said this was her "very most favorite center!" **Andrew**-"I love playing with this *points to a purse he was currently playing with*." Also said this was his favorite center along with puzzles and games. **Katherine**-said this was her least favorite center "cuz I don't like dolls."	Said this was one of the most popular centers with this class.
B	blocks	**Melissa**-"I pretty much like it because you get to build." Also said this was her favorite center along with housekeeping.	Said this was one of the most popular centers with this class.

Dollhouse center.

Dollhouse Center

Mrs. Stacy said the dollhouse center was one of the centers the students found most enjoyable. During the student interviews, all three students participating in the study expressed that they did not like this center. During the initial interview, Melissa said that she did not like the dollhouse center because "everybody gets to choose a different house. And I…we don't get the one we want to

choose. Somebody take it…" However, during the individual center interviews, when asked how she felt about the dollhouse center, Melissa said that she "pretty much liked" the center because "I get to play and have houses that I want." During Andrew's initial interview he also expressed that the dollhouse center was his least favorite center because "it's like when they tell me…when they tell me 'dollhouse!'…it's not really exciting." During Andrew's individual center interviews he expressed that he did like the mailman and the horses that were located in the dollhouse center and when asked said that he always tries to get these specific toys at this center. Katherine initially said that the dollhouse center was her least favorite center, but then changed her mind to another center. However, during the individual center interviews, Katherine said that she did not like the dollhouses "because I don't have my favorite toys." Based on the interviews, the students liked the dollhouse center when they got their favorite dollhouses or their favorite toys, but did not enjoy their time in the center as much when they did not get their favorite toys. While observing Melissa in this center, it was documented that she has a creative imagination and used different voices for different people. Andrew was also observed in this center. He was very silly playing in this center making the people jump off the roof of a house and onto a bed as well as having them hide under the bathtub. This observation relates to gender differences and preferences in that Andrew takes whatever center he is in and makes it interesting by incorporating things that he is interested in such as building, transportation, and sports.

Lego center.

Lego Center

During the initial interview, Katherine said that the Lego center was her favorite center "'cuz they're fun." Then during her individual center interview, she said again that she liked this center because she liked to play with the Lego people. Andrew

also had an individual interview for this center where he said that he liked it because "I like…I like to make stuff like cars and stuff!" Andrew was observed building what he called a transformer as well as cars and other types of vehicles which he then used to play in the surrounding environment including the table used for dollhouses and nearby storage. Again, this shows gender preferences in that Andrew focuses on his interests, mainly building, in each center to stay entertained. During the time the participating students were observed, Melissa was never in the Lego center so her opinion or actions in this center were never documented. Already, there are clear gender differences between what the male student prefers compared to the female students and what is done in each center.

### Puzzles and games center.

Puzzles and Games Center

All three participating students were interviewed about the puzzles and games center. During the initial interviews, Andrew expressed that the puzzles and games center was one of his favorite centers because he loved the "EIEIO game." This was a farm game where players had to match the faces of five farm animals to the animals on their board after pushing a button with a dice inside. Whoever got all the faces on their animals first was the winner of the game. Again, during the individual center interviews, Andrew said that he liked this particular center because of the "EIEIO game" which he said he tried to play every time he was in this center. Katherine did not mention this center during her initial interview, but expressed that she did not like this center during her individual center interview. When asked why she did not like this center, she admitted that she did not like it because "this lady's too fat" (referring to a Melissa & Doug puzzle of a ballerina). She was then asked what she thought about the puzzles in

the center to which she responded that she did not like them either. Melissa also did not mention the puzzles and games in her initial interview. However, during the individual center interviews, Melissa said that she likes the center "because you get to have a puzzle and you get to build…it together as a team!" While observing, Melissa was seen in this center attempting a large floor puzzle of a barn. She eventually got frustrated and asked for help and was then able to help put the puzzle together with another student. Katherine was also observed in this center where she and I played a game. After finishing a couple rounds of our game, she played with the animal cards for the game by herself and then joined two other students on the floor to build the large floor puzzle. Another time Katherine was observed in this center working alone on a puzzle of colors and was able to complete the entire puzzle on her own.

Sand table center.
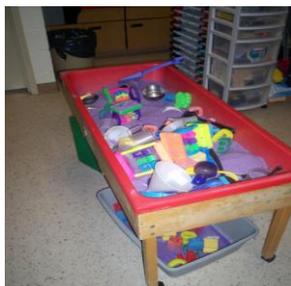
Sand Table Center

Two of the three students had individual center interviews about the sand table. Melissa did not have much to say about this center, but did express that she liked it because she got to play with sand. Katherine stated that she did not like the sand table because "it has sand and it gives you a mess!" During one of the teacher interviews, Mrs. Stacy said that she thought this was one of this class' favorite centers. Katherine was observed playing alone in this center. She did not interact with other students and made very little mess. Melissa was also observed in this center where she did not use any of the toys in the table, but just let the sand slip through her fingers. Melissa seemed bored at this center and was not as talkative as she was in other centers.

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Housekeeping center.

Housekeeping Center

Based on the interviews and observations, the housekeeping center is the most popular center in the classroom. During the first teacher interview, Mrs. Stacy stated that the housekeeping center was one of the favorite centers in the classroom. This proved to be true during the student interviews as well. During the initial interviews, Andrew said that the housekeeping center was his favorite center because "it's got the tools that they're so cool. And it's got babies." Katherine also mentioned this center during her initial interview, but said that it was her least favorite center. When asked initially she said that the dollhouses were her least favorite, but when another student mentioned the housekeeping center, she asked me to change her answer to the housekeeping center. Katherine said this was her least favorite center because she doesn't like dolls. During Katherine's interview, Melissa was listening and mentioned that she loved the housekeeping center and was disappointed that Katherine did not like the dolls in this center. Although Melissa said she liked this center, during her initial interview she did not mention this center as being one of her favorites. During the individual center interviews, Andrew stated that he loved playing with the purse that he was playing with while the interview was being conducted. When Melissa was asked how she felt about this center she said that she liked it because she got to play with babies. Then she expressed that this was her "very most favorite center!" Katherine was observed in this center playing mostly by herself. She used this time to stack the dishes very neatly and put them away. She was also seen organizing the center before it was time to clean up. Toward the end of the center time, Katherine was joined by two other

classmates who wanted to play house with her. Melissa was also observed in this center playing with the tool set and using it on one of the babies while she pretended to be a doctor. While Melissa was observed, it was noted that she was much more outgoing and social than both Andrew and Katherine. Melissa was always observed playing and interacting with the other students in her center.

Block center.
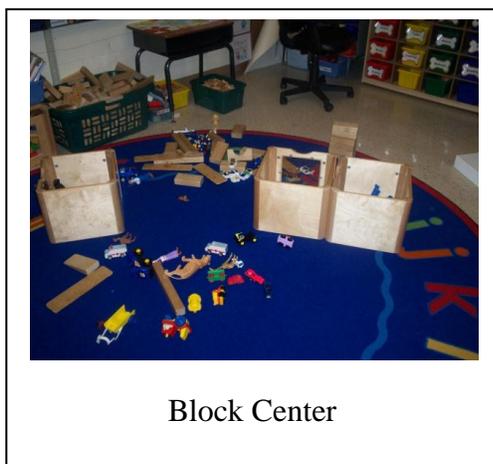
Block Center

The block center was another one of the centers that Mrs. Stacy said was one of the most popular in the classroom. During the initial student interviews, Melissa expressed that this center was her favorite because "you get to build with your friends!" This statement led me to believe that Melissa values the social environment in the classroom. Melissa also had

an individual center interview in this center where she said that she liked the center because she got to build and that her favorite thing to build in this center were castles. Katherine was also observed playing in this center and she used all of the carpeted whole group area to build with the blocks.

Trends That Emerged

Findings revealed three trends. One of the trends included social engagement and how the classroom environment plays a crucial role in the development of social interaction. Another trend that emerged from the findings included the importance of environmental print. Yet another trend included gender preferences and how they relate to the classroom environment. The following chart shows the trends that emerged and any data gathered based on each trend.

Table 4.2

Trend Code	Trend	Student Comments/Actions	Teacher Comments/Actions
SE	Social Engagement	**Melissa**-"You get to build with your friends!" (When asked why she liked the block center.) **Melissa**-You get to build things "together as a team!" (When asked why she liked the P&G center.)	**Mrs. Stacy**-"Well for most of those, it's open ended um they have a lot of chances to talk to their friends and make believe and pretend." (When asked why she thinks certain centers are more popular than others.)
EP	Environmental Print	**Katherine**-pointed out a new poster that had been added to the whole group area to accompany a new unit on bears. **Melissa**-noticed and pointed out a "tree" made out of boxes for the bear unit and how one box had Mrs. Stacy's name on it. She counted the letters and pointed out that the box said the teacher's name to the other students in her center.	**Mrs. Stacy**-"I try to use environmental print as much as possible because I believe that children learn that way the best." (1st interview) **Mrs. Stacy**-"I totally believe in environmental print and that is a big factor in their learning literacy." -Gene McDonald and another researcher from New Zealand came and did a lesson in her room and said "this is a wonderful example of environmental print being used in the classroom." (2nd interview)
GP	Gender Difference/ Preference	**Andrew**-"I like…I like to make stuff like cars and stuff!" (Lego center) -also observed building Transformers in the Lego center	

		Andrew-plays football with dollhouse people **Andrew**-content in every center despite whether he admitted liking them or not because he was able to bring his interests (building, transportation, and sports) into these centers. **Melissa and Katherine**-clearly looked uninterested in some centers that they admitted they did not enjoy rather than being able to find something of their interest to incorporate into the center.	

Social engagement.

Social engagement seemed to be an underlying trend in the interviews. While interviewing Melissa, she claimed that the reason she liked the block center was because "you get to build with your friends!" Again, Melissa claimed she liked the puzzles and games center because she was able to build "together as a team!" Based on these interviews, it is important to have a classroom environment that fosters social engagement. Having centers in the classroom where four or five students are at each center, promotes social engagement and literacy. Children together in a center are able to share ideas and thoughts with each other as well as cooperate and share toys and manipulatives.

Environmental print.

Another trend that was found while coding the data was the importance of environmental print. During an interview with Mrs. Stacy, she mentioned how important she believes

environmental print is and how she strives to put it into her classroom. She also shared a story about how Gene McDonald visited her classroom when she was teaching Kindergarten and commented on the great use of environmental print. Also, the participating students noticed the environmental print various times throughout the study. One such time was during calendar time when Katherine pointed out a new poster that had been added to accompany a story about bears. Another time environmental print proved to be an important part the literacy environment occurred when Melissa noticed that a "tree" made out of cardboard boxes for the bear unit had Mrs. Stacy's last name on it. She first pointed it out and then told me what it said. Then she counted the letters and showed the other students in her center. These examples show how the use of environmental print promotes reading and recognition of letters and words throughout the day.

Gender differences/preferences.

During the course of the study, it became apparent through interviews and observations that Andrew's actions and answers varied drastically from Melissa and Katherine's actions and answers. Andrew's answers often were centered around building things such as cars, trucks, and transformers. While observing Andrew, it became apparent that he was content in almost every center building or playing by himself. This varied from Melissa and Katherine who admitted their dislike for various centers and were both observed looking uninterested in these particular centers rather than bringing their interests into the center like Andrew.

Literacy Engagement and Motivation

This particular classroom environment promoted literacy engagement and motivation in many various ways. The use of environmental print was one of the main ways Mrs. Stacy

promoted literacy engagement in the classroom. Another way literacy engagement was promoted was that each morning the students would come in and take care of their belongings, hand in their folders, and then they were supposed to answer a question of the day. The question of the day was usually something like "Do you like strawberries?" with a column for yes and a column for no. The question would also be accompanied with supporting pictures to help the students 'read' the question on their own. These question of the days helped the students not only read and answer questions, but it helped them recognize words and their association with letters and sounds.

Yet another way literacy engagement and motivation was promoted in the classroom was the use of ABC journals. These journals were done as a center with the assistant teacher, Mrs. D. Each week, the students would focus on a letter. Mrs. D would find a craft to accompany this letter which helped the students give meaning to the letter and the letter sound. She would work with three to four students at a time until the whole class had finished. The following week, they would focus on a new letter and have a new craft and activity to add to their journal.

Read alouds represented another way of promoting literacy engagement in the classroom. Mrs. Stacy would begin a read aloud by asking the students questions activate any prior knowledge the students might already have. Then she would relate the story to something they were doing. For example, during one read aloud she pointed out how the author labeled the illustrations and how they had been labeling their illustrations to help their readers understand their stories. She then pointed out that the story being read was non-fiction and reminded the students that everything in the book was true. She showed enthusiasm while reading by asking questions and showing excitement and anticipation about what would happen next. Finally, she related the story back to the students by pointing out how baby bears and baby humans are the

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same in that they are both born with very little hair. By sharing read alouds with students, they are able to see that reading can be exciting and are more likely to become motivated to read themselves.

Guiding Questions

The first question guiding the study was: How does classroom environment play a role in literacy engagement and motivation? Based on the research findings, the classroom environment plays a critical role in literacy engagement and motivation. During the initial teacher interview, when asked why she thought certain centers were more popular than others, Mrs. Stacy said "Well most of those, it's open ended um they have a lot of chances to talk to their friends and make believe and pretend." The use of centers in this particular classroom fostered a social environment where students were sharing ideas and thoughts as well as cooperating and sharing together. Also, students were comfortable approaching Mrs. Stacy and Mrs. D because the social environment was open and accepting. Based on the research findings, classroom environment can foster literacy engagement and motivation through the use of environmental print. This allows students to make sound and letter connections as well as making connections between written and spoken words. Students in this class were also engaged in the literacy environment by working in their ABC journals, participating in read alouds, and through the use of sing alongs each morning.

The second question guiding this study was: What role does the teacher have in creating a classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement and motivation? Based on the research findings, the teacher plays a very crucial and important role in making the classroom environment conducive to literacy engagement. During the initial teacher interview, Mrs. Stacy said that she read a lot of books and found a lot of her ideas on the internet. During this

interview, she also talked about continuously striving to "find things that work for children whether the whole group or individually." During the second teacher interview, Mrs. Stacy was asked what or who influenced her to design her classroom. She answered that she did not think it was one specific person, but many ideas molded together. She said that she loves Debbie Miller, Debbie Diller, and Kathy Richardson and that they had all played a role in the way she had designed certain parts of her classroom. She also mentioned being influenced by Bev Boss and learning how play was important for students to learn. Also, Mrs. Stacy talked about how she gives the students mini lessons with materials they will need and then they are placed in a center so the students are then able to practice the skill on their own. This allowed students to understand and experience the materials before they were placed in the centers. Based on the research findings, what a teacher believes is important will be focused on in the classroom. Mrs. Stacy viewed environmental print as one of the most important aspects of a classroom and her classroom reflected these thoughts. A teacher's beliefs and teaching style drastically affect the classroom environment and how it is designed.

The third question that guided this study was: What does an effective early childhood classroom's literacy environment require? Based on the research, a classroom's literacy environment requires many things to be effective. From interviews with Mrs. Stacy, it became apparent that well labeled and easily accessible materials are vital for a classroom to run smoothly. This allows students to be more independent because they do not need to ask the teacher for help to reach materials. This also allows students to become familiar with the printed word that can be related to the material. By allowing students this independence, the teacher is also given time to work one on one or in small groups with other students with less chance of being interrupted. Another important aspect of an early childhood environment is a whole group

area where read alouds or calendar can be done as a whole class. A calendar area familiarizes

students with the names of months and days as well as making them aware of what day it is.

During calendar time the students are also interacting with each other as well as with the

classroom teacher which builds on their social engagement.

The ECERS evaluation also lists things that are important in an early childhood

classroom. The classroom used in this study rated fairly well on most of the aspects of the

environment. The one area where this particular classroom was lacking was space for gross

motor activities. This classroom was very small and did not allow for students to have much

space to do anything other than fine motor activities. Having a space big enough for gross motor

activities is important in case the weather is bad and going outside is not an option. The only

other area on the ECERS evaluation this classroom did not rate high on was furnishings for

relaxation. This classroom did not have any cozy chairs or cushions because of a fire code that

the whole school follows. The only area in the classroom that could be considered a cozy area

was the whole group rug, but this area was used as the block center for most of the day. Based on

the research and the ECERS checklist, this classroom had many of the requirements that are

crucial in creating an effective classroom environment.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

During this research study, many forms of data were collected. Teacher and student interviews were conducted throughout the study to determine the feelings and thoughts of the participants. Photographs were taken to capture the classroom environment. The ECERS evaluation was used to rate the classroom physical environment and the social environment. This information was coded to answer the three guiding questions.

Significance

From this study, it can be concluded that classroom environment can help foster literacy engagement. In this particular study, the classroom was rich with environmental print which allows the students to see words and make the relation between the written word and the spoken word. Another way this particular classroom aided in literacy engagement and motivation was by allowing students to have center time and to interact with one another. Students at such a young age thrive on sharing ideas and thoughts with others. The use of read alouds also helped promote literacy engagement. However, throughout the course of the study, read alouds were not frequently observed.

Various things can be done to ensure that students are motivated and engaged with literacy. I believe the most important way to engage students in the literacy environment is to show them that reading can be fun and exciting. This can be done by sharing regular read alouds where the teacher demonstrates excitement or anticipation while reading. By doing this, the teacher can guide students on how to interact with texts. Another approach could be to have a reading time during the day where the students are allowed only to read. The students should be allowed to choose books of their interest during this time and the teacher should also read. If the

teacher also reads during this time, it shows the students that the reading time is valued and should be taken seriously. Another way to promote literacy, is to send books home in book bags with activities for the families to complete with their students over the weekend or throughout a week. This shows students that reading is just as important and can be just as fun outside of school as it is inside school. This also shows students that adults view reading and literacy as vital and important and therefore it may help the students view it as vital and important.

This study helped me in planning the design of my future classroom. By observing the children in this classroom environment, I was able to find things that I want to try in my classroom as well as some things that I think I would do differently. This classroom environment included wonderful examples of environmental print and I was really able to see the effects and how the students engaged and learned from the environmental print. Because of this, I will strive to have a classroom rich with environmental print so that my students can learn from everything around them. I was also able to witness the importance of centers and their benefits. Centers can aid in social development by allowing the students to use manipulatives on their own and in new and exciting ways. Especially with young children, I believe it is very important for students to be able to share ideas with their peers. This allows students to gain new ideas and thoughts about different situations which can broaden their horizons and make them think more critically.

Read alouds, something I view as being very important for literacy engagement and motivation, in my opinion, were not used enough in this classroom. In my own classroom, I will use read alouds to show students how to engage with a book, how to question a text, how to connect with the author, and how to make predictions. I believe read alouds can be crucial in showing students that reading can be excited and can be an adventure. When students see teachers becoming excited and engaged in literature, it makes them more likely to want to

become engaged. By reading aloud to students each day, it can help them realize that reading is important and can teach you new and exciting information.

Findings and Theoretical Stance

The findings of this study relate to my theoretical stance in that constructivist teachers realize that students learn gradually. The classroom teacher used in this particular study understood this because she would do whole group mini lessons and then place the materials in centers. This allowed students to learn the correct way to use the materials and then have more time to explore and use the manipulatives on their own. The use of environmental print also agrees with constructivist theories in that it allows students to continually see the words on a daily basis. This allows them to gradually make connections between written words and spoken words. The students comments during the interviews show that the students are learning from their activities in the classroom and that their play is important.

Limitations

Although I believe this study was conclusive in showing that literacy engagement and classroom environment are directly related, there were various limitations. One major limitation was that the study was only performed at one school, using one classroom, with only three students. For this particular study, the results are reliable and valid. However, based on the small sample size, the results cannot be generalized to other settings. If more participants from other schools and districts were interviewed and observed, this would result in more reliable findings.

Also, personalities of the three participants varied greatly. Melissa was very outgoing and willing to talk about anything with me; whereas, Katherine was very shy and quiet and gave simple answers to the interview questions. Andrew would often just say he liked the center because of whatever he was playing with during the time of the interview. Although each student

interviewed had a very different personality and this showed in their individual interviews, this could also be viewed as a good thing because a wide array of personalities were used for the study making the results more valid than if only three shy students or only three outgoing students were interviewed.

Another limitation of this particular study was that the three students were so young. Therefore, it was hard to get answers to interview questions. Students at this young age are easily persuaded by their peers, and I saw examples of that happening during the interviews. For example, Katherine told me about her least favorite center and Melissa said that she liked that center, so Katherine asked to change her answer to a different center. This makes the interview answers not as reliable as they would be if I were asking someone who was not persuaded by a classmate. Also, students this young easily change their minds and may not have solid opinions formed about certain things. For example, the students would often contradict themselves from the initial student interview to the individual center interviews. I believe this was just the students' interest varying from day to day.

Yet another limitation of this study was that each student was not interviewed in each center. Because I was there for a short period of time and only in the mornings during center time, I was unable to see Melissa, Katherine, and Andrew engaged in each center in the classroom. Therefore, I was unable to get their opinions about particular centers as well as being unable to observe them in these different surroundings.

Suggestions For Future Research

Future studies should focus on this topic to determine to what extent the classroom environment plays a role in literacy engagement and motivation. My suggestions for future

research would be to include a wider variety of schools. More reliable and valid results could occur if schools with different socioeconomic statuses, religions, and races and from different locales were used in a study. Also, I would suggest observing and interviewing teachers and students from more than one grade level from each school. Lastly, I would suggest using more than three students from each setting. By having a wider range of interviewees, the findings of the study will become more reliable and valid. Also, by interviewing and observing more than one teacher, more information will be gathered on what influences teachers in designing their classroom. This may also tell future researchers what classroom teachers think an effective literacy environment requires and what they believe should be included in an effective literacy environment.

Findings from additional research can then be used to help future classroom teachers design effective literacy environments that will be engaging and will motivate their students. Linda Gambrell (1996) said it perfectly when she stated:

> We can, however, make a real difference in the literacy lives of young children when we serve as reading models and motivators and create classroom cultures that are book-rich, provide opportunities for choice, encourage social interactions about books, build on the familiar, and reflect the view that books are the best reward. (p. 23).

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